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Special meeting on "Towards sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through participation of all" (*continued*)

Summary record of the 33rd meeting
Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 23 May 2018, at 3 p.m.

President: Ms. Chatardova ..... (Czechia)

Contents

Interactive dialogue on "Strengthening cooperation for sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies"

Conclusion of the meeting

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The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

Interactive dialogue on "Strengthening cooperation for sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies"

1. **Mr. Steven** (Senior Fellow and Associate Director at New York University's Center on International Cooperation), moderator, said that inclusion was a core theme of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Agenda itself, with its vision for an open, tolerant and socially inclusive world, was the product of a participatory process in which the views of almost 10 million people had been solicited. World leaders had emphasized that implementation of the Agenda would require the strong participation of all, and they had identified children, women and youth as agents of change. They had furthermore promised that the Sustainable Development Goals would provide a platform to channel the activist capacities of women and youth into the creation of a better world. Several Goals contained inclusiveness targets, namely: to empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all (target 10.2); to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (target 16.7); and to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels (target 5.5).

2. The Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies comprised a group of States, international organizations and other partners, convened by the Governments of Brazil, Sierra Leone and Switzerland, to transform the Sustainable Development Goal targets for peace, justice and inclusion into an agenda for action. In that regard, the group had recently published a road map which set out a strategy for inclusion at the political, social and economic levels and contained practical recommendations, emphasizing the need to assess models of participation in different contexts. It stressed the need for strategies to deepen citizen-led governance, enhance civic participation and promote representation in institutions. The road map called for investment in programmes to demonstrate how communities could participate in policy development. It advocated women's leadership, particularly in crisis settings, and it asked for increased opportunities for youth in activism. Finally, it called for investment in civic education on sustainable development and the protection and enhancement of civic space.

3. **Mr. Gilmour** (Assistant Secretary-General for Human Rights and Head of the New York Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), panellist, said that a vibrant and free civil society was necessary to ensure that all voices, not only those of experts, were heard. Inclusivity was important for holding to account those who were supposed to implement the Sustainable Development Goals, as Governments did not have a monopoly on wisdom.

4. It was increasingly understood that a human rights-based approach was necessary for combating inequality, exclusion and discrimination in the achievement of the Goals. National efforts to achieve the Goals in places such as Costa Rica had yielded useful lessons; there, the United Nations system had supported the Government in establishing a national pact for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda that had involved academia, the press, women, trade unions and vulnerable groups such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex persons, migrants and people of African descent.

5. Civil society participation in the high-level political forum on sustainable development should be increased and civil society organizations should take part in the preparation of voluntary national reports on progress made towards achieving the Goals at the country level. Creative ideas could also be drawn from the human rights sphere. For example, the universal periodic review, an important exercise for every Member State, could be a useful model both for the voluntary national reviews and for progress reports on the Goals. Reviews involving intensive consultations with civil society in the preparation of States' reports were helpful for fostering dialogue, not only with Governments and State institutions but also with diverse civil society sectors. They also helped to monitor progress.

6. An obstacle to civil society participation at the United Nations was that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) needed consultative status with the Council and, regrettably, the obstacles to obtaining that status had increased over time. Applications from NGOs were sometimes deferred for years for seemingly arbitrary reasons.

7. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights provided technical assistance on a range of issues that could provide lessons for the achievement of the Goals and help Governments to ensure the rights of their peoples to political and civic participation and the right to information. In Indonesia, for example, the Office had supported the passage of a bill on the rights of persons with disabilities and in Iraq it had helped to draft an important anti-discrimination law for the inclusion of ethnic and religious minorities. In Bolivia, it had supported the implementation of a national action plan against racism. In Tanzania, it had developed technical assistance in the drafting of a constitution and a law on

access to information. In Malawi, it had facilitated a multi-stakeholder national forum for dialogue on business and human rights.

8. While those efforts were of course useful, they took place in a context of increasing restrictions on civil society. He was particularly concerned by the increasing trend of reprisals against individuals for cooperating with the United Nations, ranging from travel bans and refusal of medical treatment to imprisonment, torture and death. Criminalization and delegitimization were other common means of undermining civil society. Individuals were also sometimes targeted for being unpatriotic, anti-family or anti-religion in smear campaigns aimed at suppressing civil society.

9. At the morning meeting, the Deputy Secretary-General had made an important statement regarding the need to end barriers to inclusivity and ensure that sustainable development was rooted in respect for and promotion of human rights. The plans put forward at the high-level political forum to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals needed to expand public understanding of the Goals and to include the voices of the most vulnerable.

10. **Mr. Chungong** (Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union), panellist, said that parliaments played a key role in promoting good governance. In their ideal forms, parliaments were representative of society and examples of the partnerships that existed among various segments of society. In the current global climate characterized by hypercompetitive environments and a lack of trust in Governments, the importance of cooperation and partnerships to the 2030 Agenda could not be overemphasized.

11. Effective partnerships brought multiple actors together around a common cause, such as the 2030 Agenda. The role of parliamentarians was very relevant to that Agenda, as they were supposed to integrate the interests of wider societies, an endeavour that required ongoing dialogue among all elements of society, including marginalized groups. In that context, the issue of hierarchies within partnerships should not be ignored. Partnerships were sometimes misconstrued to mean that all partners were on an equal footing, but the Inter-Parliamentary Union believed that Governments had a primary role in forging the policies that governed societies, and that parliaments must hold Governments to their commitments. Parliaments should work on behalf of everyone, irrespective of their wealth or ethnic origin, and should forge laws in line with international commitments on human rights.

12. In recent years, Governments had retreated from their responsibility to regulate society and had instead embraced economic liberalization, deregulation and privatization, a course of action that would not lead to strong partnerships. Parliaments and Governments must therefore work together to restore balance and undertake robust action to create an environment conducive to sustainable development. There was also a need for more proactive social action so that all were included. Although civil society had a strong role to play in organizing people and articulating goals, relations between Governments and civil society often remained fraught with suspicion. Governments should take steps to rectify that situation.

13. The private sector also had a role to play in partnerships, especially as it was called on to help to finance the 2030 Agenda. More robust engagement with the private sector was needed to foster inclusive and resilient societies. It was also important to ensure that private sector activities were not damaging to the environment and that goods and services were beneficial for society and consistent with the 2030 Agenda.

14. As a major representative institution of Government, parliaments needed to make efforts to bring all components of society together. In their practices and procedures, parliaments should forge partnerships with civil society and the private sector and allow those partnerships to inform their work. However, they were not always able to carry out their designated role because, in many jurisdictions, they were not fit for purpose and lacked the skills and knowledge required for building a resilient society. For that reason, other stakeholders should do their part to empower parliaments by helping to provide those skills.

15. **Ms. Molina Niño** (Chief Executive Officer, BRAVA Investments, and 2018 New York City and State's Corporate Social Responsibility Diversity Honoree for exceptional leadership in educating women entrepreneurs), panellist, said her company invested in businesses that benefited women. While other private investment funds also claimed to focus on women, the mission of BRAVA Investments was more expansive because it did not focus merely on women founders. Venture capitalists were unduly concerned with who occupied the executive or board positions in a company but such matters of representation were not the most pressing and it was more important to fund projects that would help women as a class. A company that focused solely on funding for women entrepreneurs, for example, might refuse to hear the business pitch of a man who had discovered the cure for breast cancer, even though the results of his research would greatly improve the lives of women. Her company also de-emphasized the role of female founders because it was concerned with large-scale investment, and it was impossible to

invest billions of dollars in projects that were exclusively women-owned.

16. As an unapologetically for-profit enterprise, her company used growth as the main criterion when selecting sectors for investment. Having ascertained which of the top 10 high-growth sectors internationally had the highest proportion of women consumers and employees, it had identified consumer products, health care and education as the key sectors.

17. Her company also prioritized long-term investment strategies. While most other investment funds required a return on investments after one to five years, a longer-term strategy allowed for more flexibility, which was conducive to the flourishing of public-private partnerships. By contrast, many other venture capital funds were overly concerned with short-term exits. Those companies also followed a "spray and pray" strategy, whereby investors injected funds into a wide range of projects on the assumption that the vast majority of them would fail while the remaining 1 per cent would be successful. However, that was not a wise strategy for a company that was concerned with benefiting women, because women did not recover easily from bankruptcy.

18. BRAVA Investments was interested in identifying the source of the problems faced by women. While it was true that only 2 per cent of venture capital was invested in women-owned businesses, the larger systemic problem was that very few women were ready to start a business in the first place. In many cases, they did not have the professional or social networks that would, for example, enable them to receive free legal advice or borrow funds from wealthy friends and family. In some cases they did not even have their own funds or savings accounts. As a result, women's business activities were often confined to microbusinesses that would never significantly expand.

19. **Mr. Rákos** (Head of Business Development and Special Projects at D21), panellist, said that he designed processes and services that supported public participation, particularly at the municipal and regional levels. Public participation processes for both Governments and citizens had to be made secure. It was easy to design a just, equal and accessible process for a city that benefited all stakeholders. If citizens were disengaged, that was likely the fault of the process, but if the process was well-designed and civic engagement was nevertheless low, that meant that civic education in schools was poor. Experts who focused on technological and offline solutions, such as public meetings for participatory budgeting and urban planning processes, could see first-hand that civic education had been largely ineffective and that citizens were unprepared to engage in participatory processes. Another main contributor to the success of the process was the community's trust, which could take years to be regained once lost.

20. Many tools and methodologies available for participatory processes had not been put to effective use. A lack of money was not the reason, however, as funding those processes at the municipal and regional levels was inexpensive. For example, processes to improve civic education in cities could be done within six months for only 100,000 dollars. The reason that tools and methodologies went unused was that most clients were not aware of the gaps in their knowledge. Most mayors and municipal officials were not familiar with the concept of representative samples and had no background in interpreting demographic data, and those shortcomings were a barrier to developing an understanding of their communities. As public participation was a multidisciplinary and complex subject, experts needed to have an understanding of sociology, urban planning, communications and the best practices of management consulting companies. Otherwise they would not be able to design a sound process.

21. His organization welcomed international and national action to boost public participation. Governments and international organizations must help to institutionalize the process, but they should not be in control of it.

22. **Mr. Meja** (Coordinator at Reality of Aid Africa Network), panellist, said that inclusive partnerships were essential for resilient and inclusive societies. Governments must identify factors that impeded inclusivity in order to unlock the potential for civil society and the private sector to play a vital role in development, and they must design frameworks that captured the potential contributions of both. In that regard, legal obstacles to inclusivity should be tackled. For instance, the Constitution of Kenya contained a public participation requirement, which meant that processes established without such participation were not legally valid. Political factors also hindered public participation. Governments should therefore change, or address, rhetoric that hampered the participation of parliaments, the private sector and civil society. It was also necessary to overcome institutional impediments and bureaucracy. Systems in which Governments were the ultimate source of wisdom and resources were not conducive to inclusive partnerships. Inclusive partnerships should be promoted and practised at the country level, especially through carefully structured multi-stakeholder dialogues, one of various instruments,

methodologies and tools that could be used at the national level to foster inclusive partnerships.

23. Even more important than the right tools, however, was the creation of enabling conditions — both for inclusive partnerships and, in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals, for democratic ownership. Mechanisms were needed to mobilize and value the contributions of communities on the ground towards the achievement of country priorities under the 2030 Agenda. Civil society and parliament must contribute to policy formulation, implementation and evaluation.

24. To strengthen cooperation, accountability and transparency were prerequisites. While Governments did not like to admit to mistakes, citizens tended to appreciate honest communication from them and accept that they were not perfect. Such transparency engaged citizens, preparing them for the painful moments that implementation of the 2030 Agenda would inevitably entail and helping them to understand what could realistically be achieved at the national level. In that context, NGOs and the private sector should be encouraged to provide input on what was working, in addition to inputs on the voluntary national reviews that Governments submitted. Supportive public institutions that created an enabling environment, in particular for civil society organizations, were essential to facilitate such non-governmental contributions. Government hostility towards particular groups, or legal impediments to their participation, must be addressed, through legal reforms and the adoption of new perspectives on engagement.

25. **Ms. O'Dwyer** (Observer for the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul) said that her organization, which had approximately 16,000 members in 94 countries, focused on reducing poverty and marginalization and believed that inclusion at the grass roots level was vital in all stages of discussions, policymaking and programme development. A 2017 survey on voluntary national reviews, conducted by the task force of the NGO Committee on Social Development, had revealed low levels of awareness of the existence of the reviews. She therefore proposed establishing a hotline to enable all people to provide input into the voluntary national reviews.

26. As the last significant international data on homelessness had been collected in 2005, countries should make a greater commitment to collecting such data.

27. Investment in women's country leadership was also needed. While few female national leaders currently held office, women had valuable perspectives to offer, particularly on issues that directly affected them such as maternity care and domestic violence.

28. In the context of inclusion, the United Nations could create forums for people living on under a $1.25 a day; such meetings, especially if they included people from the North and the South, would shine a light on a range of major issues.

29. Lastly, it was difficult for NGOs to obtain consultative status with the Council and even those granted such status often still had problems accessing United Nations Headquarters, especially during the main session of the General Assembly when their participation was most important. Any efforts to boost NGO participation would therefore be welcome.

30. **Ms. Oliveira Sobota** (Observer for Brazil) said that participation was key for achieving not only Sustainable Development Goal 16 on peaceful and inclusive societies, but also the 2030 Agenda as a whole. While different countries had their own models for civil society participation, those organizations were increasingly connected at the global level and were contributing to a more unified international approach by sharing their experiences. Recent best practices in participative public policymaking and implementation in Brazil involved inclusive national councils, some of which had been established by the Constitution to monitor policies in such areas as health, education and women, and some of which had been established on an ad hoc basis to engage the population at large with a view to influencing policy formulation. To make policymaking even more participative, civil society should take the lead by developing mechanisms that ensured its own participation, rather than having the Government dictate inclusive models in a formal, top-down way.

31. Encouragingly, new social movements related to justice and security were emerging in Brazil in response to the high rates of homicide, which particularly affected young people living in the suburbs, Afro-Brazilian youth and women. Those movements would play an important part in achieving the 2030 Agenda. As the moderator had already indicated, the Governments of Brazil, Sierra Leone and Switzerland were contributing to the development of a road map to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 16, with the support of New York University. The road map was an ongoing, open exercise and all interested parties were invited to participate in the project.

32. **Ms. Kim** Junhee (Republic of Korea) said that transparent, accountable and participatory governance would support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. However, substantial participation

required infrastructure and Governments must make data more widely available so that citizens could engage in decision-making processes. Owing to the technical nature of many government discussions, citizens were unlikely to participate in setting priorities or resource allocation. In order to play a more active role, people needed to be empowered to audit and verify the details of public policies.

33. **Mr. Meja** (Coordinator at Reality of Aid Africa Network) said that the profile of voluntary national reviews needed to be raised and that people must participate in the reporting process in order to be aware of, and committed to, addressing the problems outlined therein. For that reason, the Reality of Aid Africa Network was encouraging Governments to establish participatory processes for the preparation of their national reports through dialogue at the national and local levels. As public access to data was important, Governments should enact legislation that strengthened data availability.

34. **Mr. Rákos** (Head of Business Development and Special Projects at D21) said that understanding what participation at different levels of government or institutions entailed was problematic. For example, citizen participation in a health system differed from citizen participation in the management of a municipality. It was therefore important to define those differences and to recognize the inherent complexities of the various systems.

35. Even when Governments were transparent and had pure and honest intentions, citizens at times still failed to engage with them. That could perhaps be explained by the fact that governments at all levels had not yet started to treat citizens as customers. The private sector had long ago realized the importance of studying customers and focusing on their experience. Governments should follow that example and carefully consider human nature, and their citizens' experience, in order to design processes that would elicit engagement.

36. **Ms. Molina Niño** (Chief Executive Officer, BRAVA Investments, and 2018 New York City and State's Corporate Social Responsibility Diversity Honoree for exceptional leadership in educating women entrepreneurs) said that it was useful to adopt a fresh point of view. For example, rather than seeing the homeless and young people as marginalized groups, from a long-term perspective they could equally be seen as undervalued assets in whom it made great sense to invest. While inclusivity meant including traditionally excluded groups such as women, the homeless and people of colour, it also involved those who might otherwise wash their hands of problems. Her strategy for improving women's lives could be described as the "you broke it, you fix it" approach. In other words, men must be held to account and take joint ownership of the process, not as allies, but as stakeholders.

37. **Mr. Chungong** (Secretary-General of the Inter-Parliamentary Union) said that voluntary national reviews could be made more effective through replication of the models used for universal periodic reviews and the reviews submitted in accordance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, under which a multi-stakeholder approach was taken at the country level. Voluntary national reviews should not be considered the sole property of the governmental agencies responsible for implementing the development agenda. Multi-stakeholder national dialogue platforms that included representatives of civil society and parliament should be established to prepare the reviews. In 2017, parliaments had engaged in less than 25 per cent of the voluntary national reviews. As the outcomes of the reviews would fall to parliaments to implement, they must have a sense of ownership and be informed when their countries were up for review.

38. Trust was a prerequisite for partnerships for sustainable development in the context of resilient societies. Governing institutions must view civil society and parliaments as partners, not opponents.

39. Lastly, overrepresentation in government institutions, in addition to the underrepresentation of certain groups, was a problem. A recent study had shown that business interests were highly represented in Latin American government institutions, including parliaments. Marginalized groups such as women, children, indigenous people and persons with disabilities should be included in decision-making at the national level.

40. **Mr. Lebeda** (Observer for Glopolis — Prague Global Policy Institute) said that while trust was an integrating element of resilience and inclusion, only its formal aspects such as transparency, accountability and evidence-based planning tended to be mentioned. There was an equally important informal side to trust which involved softer skills, such as building human relationships, meeting on a regular basis to discuss informal issues and making friends. A large part of the discussion on trust related to informal elements. Best practices or methodologies that could be used to build the informal component of trust were therefore crucial.

Conclusion of the meeting

41. **Mr. Liu** Zhenmin (Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs) said that the participation

of all was critical for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, hence the inclusion of the target on participatory decision-making under Sustainable Development Goal 16. No one sector, constituency or level of government alone had the capacity to meet the immense challenges posed by the 2030 Agenda. Partnerships must therefore be forged between national Government and local government, between public institutions and people, between NGOs and the private sector, and between academia and civil society, among others. Support and follow-up mechanisms must also be established to guarantee the success of those partnerships as a means of implementation to advance the 2030 Agenda.

42. Governments and institutions must begin to work differently by informing, consulting and listening to each other, including by making use of new technologies and platforms. Established practices, such as participatory budgeting, should also be considered and scaled up.

43. The success of the 2030 Agenda depended on the promise to leave no one behind. While the creative solutions that had been discussed during the course of the meeting offered much hope for the future, it was important to embed the engagement and participation of all into permanent and far-reaching structures and institutional frameworks.

44. The participation of all must be viewed as a critical asset that not only enriched discussions but also made it possible to benefit from localized knowledge, to adapt responses to needs and catalyse creative solutions, thereby supporting the successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

45. Communication and outreach were also vital. More effective ways should be found to communicate the challenges the world was facing and how those would be addressed by achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

46. Lastly, the engagement of all also meant the responsibility of all to create strong and responsive governments and institutions at all levels. To that end, stakeholder consultation and engagement must be enhanced and groups must work together in a coherent and mutually reinforcing way.

47. **The President**, summing up, said that the deliberations had resulted in key messages that would support sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through the participation of all. There was a consensus that new technologies had the potential to significantly improve participation. However, *the proper resources* must be made available at the local level to ensure the engagement of the most vulnerable, including those without Internet access. The private sector could play a role in improving Internet access and connectivity. To that end, there had been many calls for Governments to take the lead in creating more space for the participation of all in governance by promoting the use of online platforms, including existing social media platforms.

48. Local governments could strengthen inclusion through participatory budgeting, crowd-sourcing, consensus-building and communication with the community. Partnerships and participation at the local level could build momentum on key issues, leading to institutional changes such as legislative reform.

49. Although Governments were primarily responsible for implementing the 2030 Agenda, the importance of multiple actors' involvement had been highlighted. Academia was increasingly partnering with the public sector and policymakers to strengthen data collection and make data more user-friendly so that it could be used to help influence better public policy decisions. However, more remained to be done to improve data collection and accessibility.

50. A vibrant and actively engaged civil society was also crucial in achieving the participation of all, and in promoting and monitoring progress of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Further ideas were needed to enhance civil society engagement. In addition, parliaments played an important part in bringing together all sectors of society; obstacles such as insufficient resources, skills and knowledge must be overcome in order to further enhance their role.

51. Lastly, in order to combat exclusion and discrimination and realize the 2030 Agenda, it had been underlined that sustainability must be based on human rights and respect for everyone's right to development.

The meeting rose at 4.45 p.m.